

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study looked at students' business reports based on 'acceptability' standards of the workplace. The investigation carried out revealed important information on the report writing practices in the workplace, the criteria employers looked for in a business report, and the extent to which business students were successful in writing a business report that met with these criteria. The study utilised a qualitative case study method in order to access the relevant information on standards for reports and student performance. The findings obtained from this investigation provided useful insights into the standard of writing that employers expected of fresh graduates. These have important implications for the teaching of report writing in the classroom.

This chapter summarizes the findings obtained in this study and the implications that can be drawn from them. The discussion will begin with a summary of report writing practices in a local, private organisation, as gauged from the viewpoints of two selected gatekeepers. The rest of the discussion which follows will be presented in relation to the research questions put forth in the study:

1. What are the criteria by which 'acceptability' is measured in the workplace with regard to written analytical reports?
2. Do students' reports measure up to these criteria? If not, why?
3. What are the gatekeepers', students' and course instructors' opinions on measures to be taken in making the reports more acceptable to the intended audience?
4. What are the implications of the above on the Report Writing component in the course?

## **5.2 SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

### **5.2.1 Report Writing Practices in the Workplace**

The results of the study indicate that report writing was quite a major activity for both Senior Managers. These managers, who formed the gatekeepers in this study (Marketing (GK 1) and Administration (GK 2) respectively), reported that on the whole, they spent a considerable portion of their time at work undertaking activities related to reports, especially reading reports. Other activities include researching for writing a report, the actual writing of reports, editing of reports and assisting others in writing a report, although due to job functions and demands, the actual amount of time spent on these activities differed slightly between the two gatekeepers. For example, GK 1's job responsibilities as a Marketing Manager required him to carry out product developments which involved a great deal of market research. He thus reported spending much more time reading and researching than writing reports. Most of the time, the activity

of researching for writing a report was carried out collaboratively with his executives. In relation to types of reports, GK 1 found analytical reports such as problem solving, market research and corporate planning to be more relevant to his job than informational reports.

GK 2, on the other hand, spent more time reading and writing reports. This could be due to the fact that as a person in charge of administrative duties in the organisation, the need for information and communication is greater so as to coordinate the efforts of each department in the organisation with the efforts of the total business (Lesikar & Pettit Jr., 1995). In this regard, the informational functions of internal documents such as progress, operational, status and annual reports may be important for her in overseeing developments in the company's business and in maintaining organisational well-being.

It is worth mentioning here that perhaps further research which covers a larger population of managers from each of the two relevant departments than that selected in this study could help establish whether the differences that exist concerning relevance of report types and frequency of activities for reports between managers are significant. There have been studies which looked at how various factors such as job category, level in the organisation and years of work experience could be related to time spent writing at work but conclusive evidence was found only for the relationship between time spent writing and job category (Anderson, in Odell & Goswami, 1985).

Despite all this, results of this study indicate that reports and report writing occupied important positions in the business organisation and that both gatekeepers agreed that good report writing ability was important and necessary in their fields. From the feedback obtained from GK 2, good writing and report writing ability could have a determining effect on a worker's prospects for advancement. Both gatekeepers also saw the need for more trained personnel who can communicate effectively the necessary information vital for the organisation's growth in the online service market, especially in the face of the country's recent economic slowdown. This fact has important pedagogical implications for the teaching and learning of business reports in the classroom.

### **5.2.2 The Criteria of Acceptability for Written Analytical Reports**

This study revealed a macro view of the criteria/features employers in a selected business organisation looked for in a written business report. Results show that Content, Organization, Language and Style and Presentation were 'important' criteria to look for in a report. The gatekeepers, however, attached slightly different degrees of importance to these elements of a report. GK 1 regarded Content, Organization and Presentation as 'important' and Language and Style' as 'quite important' in a report. GK 2 found Content, Organization, Language and Style as 'very important' in a report but Presentation as 'quite important'.

The differences that existed were, however, very slight and may be acceptable on the grounds that individual differences do exist in the way that people in organisations conceive of workplace related assignments or projects. It may also

be the case that evaluator of a proposal calls for different emphases ( Miller & Selzer in Odell & Goswami, 1985: 324). It is perhaps useful to note here that the questionnaire designed to elicit the above information made use of a close-ended list that required the gatekeepers to make their choices from the criteria that the researcher included in the list. Therefore, it may be possible that other criteria existed, although the gatekeepers did not mention any when inquired.

Nonetheless, the feedback provided by the two gatekeepers on the features of each of the criterion above offered some important insights into the quality of reports that were judged to be 'acceptable' in the organisation. These features will be highlighted here in the discussion that follows. Particular attention will be given to those features which were similarly addressed by both gatekeepers to point to the more distinctive features/criteria of analytical reports.

In general within the context of this study, many of the features addressed by both gatekeepers were mainly attributes of general writing skills such as conciseness and clarity. These include, for Content, conciseness in terms of how the data was expressed, relevance of the points included to the purpose of the report, appropriateness of Content to the context/situation, as well as completeness in terms of how comprehensive treatment of the issue in question was. GK 2 ( Senior Manager, Administration) made specific reference to the need for focus. This, according to her, would ensure that the report meets its objective(s)/purpose. This viewpoint was also shared by GK 1 (Senior Manager, Marketing), who firmly believed that purpose as well as audience needs should be the primary concerns for a report writer.

The other category of answers/ feedback from both gatekeepers consisted of features specifically related to report writing skills. These include criteria such as maximum analyses of points and a fair amount of background and industry knowledge. GK 2, however, placed less emphasis on these aspects unless they were necessary based on their relevance to the purpose of the report. Her comments could have been made in reference to informational reports, where a maximum analysis of points may be less necessary than analytical reports. It would be interesting to see whether criteria for reports vary according to report types. Should this be the case, the teaching and learning of reports could benefit from exposure to many different kinds of reports and their structures .

Organization played an equally important role in a report. A common principle seems to be that there need not be a conventional or standardized way of organizing the content as long as it assisted the readers in following the relationship of points clearly. In this regard, GK 2 mentioned features specific to basic writing skills such as the need for a good flow of ideas, natural progression between points and logical arrangement of points. These are themselves skills necessary for achieving coherence and unity in writing. GK 1 added the point that could be important for reports: to him, good organization of points should indicate to the reader the emphasis and organization of facts. This seems a significant factor in view of the way readers in organizations read reports. Therefore, the information should be organized in a way that enabled the readers to easily access the information which was more relevant and important for them in their decision making process. Here, aspects such as audience awareness, a

report outline/ Table of Content and to some extent the Executive Summary (as a necessary component in an analytical report) are necessary considerations in the report writing process.

'Language' was also taken into account in judging the 'acceptability' of a report. Although each of the gatekeepers attached slightly different degrees of importance to 'Language', both had very similar things to say about what constituted 'good' language use. The trend seems to be for simplicity and conciseness. The specific features of language that GK 1 and GK2 mentioned consistently were 'simple and easy to understand', 'concise and straight to the point'. The need for such attributes of 'Language' can be understood on the grounds that readers in organisations usually have limited time on their hands and thus are only prepared to read a report that has been written clearly and concisely enough for them to be able to grasp its content immediately. The key principle appears to be that language use and style should communicate the intended message effectively. Both GK 1 and GK 2 were in agreement to this. Another point on 'Language' was 'objectivity' but this was mentioned only by GK 2, thus it may not be prominent enough, within the context of this study, to be considered as a necessary feature for language of reports.

The physical presentation of reports figured quite considerably in a report. Presentation here includes the use of visual support/graphics, format and layout. The general agreement between the gatekeepers was that the visuals used must be suitable and relevant/purposeful to the report, in that they helped explain and clarify information in the report rather than act as mere illustration. The format

and layout of the report, although were reportedly not standardised, should be carefully considered as they helped contribute to an effective report in a way that allows information to be easily accessible to the readers.

Results of this study show that other general skills less related to the textual features of reports were also important. One which both GK 1 and GK 2 addressed was the ability to apply knowledge to a given job situation. This point was made in reference to their junior executives who had difficulties going beyond their basic classroom knowledge when writing. Such an ability is perhaps expected in someone writing an analytical report, where a great deal of analysis and reasoning are required to produce a report that is relevant and applicable for a particular job situation. It should thus be taken as another yardstick for judging the quality of an analytical report. Other general skills which GK 1 addressed directly were analytical and reasoning abilities, information processing and research skills.

All in all, results of this study indicate that the gatekeepers emphasized general writing skills such as conciseness, clarity and organization over other skills that could be more specific to reports. This could be because skills such as these can be applied when writing any form of communication (Anderson, in Odell & Goswami, 1985: 56). In other words, they are skills that are transferable across various writing situations.

In addressing the concept of organisational standards for reports, it is important to note that the criteria laid out in this study, reflecting that found in the organisation



(reported by the gatekeepers), are not as stringent as those found in some other larger organisations, such as KLM (Sargunan, 1999). However, this must not be taken to imply that the criteria laid out by the gatekeepers are in any way inferior or mediocre according to existing standards in industry. More research needs to be done in this area before any conclusions can be made with regard to this aspect of report writing.

It is nonetheless important for ESP writing courses to pay attention to developing general writing skills among students as some may not have come to the course readily equipped with the necessary skills for good writing. Consideration should also be given to aspects such as audience awareness and the Executive Summary, as well as factors such as degree of analysis and background knowledge, objectivity in language use, formatting and layout in the teaching of reports. Harnessing students' general abilities such as analytical and reasoning abilities found to be equally important to the overall task of report writing should also be considered.

### **5.2.3 Students' Reports**

The study required the gatekeepers to evaluate reports written by business students to see whether the reports measured up to the criteria of an 'acceptable' report. Information of this nature is useful to measure not only the expectations of the students' audiences but to gauge the students' ability in producing an 'acceptable' report, as would-be members of the business community. This in

turn would provide a starting point in exploring the effectiveness of the English for Business course that the students took as preparation for workplace writing.

A total of nine group reports written by a selected group of business students were looked at. Out of this nine, five were on Marketing and four on Human Resource and Administration, evaluated by GK 1 and GK 2 respectively. The results of the evaluation show that eight out of nine reports failed to measure up to the criteria of an analytical report set forth, and thus were found to be unacceptable. These reports fell below the standards expected of an analytical report, therefore, cannot be used for organisational decision making purposes (see Chapter 4 for results and scale used). Only one report (Report 1; Human Resource) which was evaluated by GK 2 was found to be acceptable, although quite a substantial amount of improvement was needed on many aspects of the report.

In providing their comments on the reports, the gatekeepers found major weaknesses in Content, Organization and Language. It is quite possible to generalize from both of the gatekeepers' comments on the reports as they identified similar problems in those three areas. Firstly, the contents of the reports were found to be generally weak. Most did not address the topic of the report or the issue in question adequately. They contained inaccurate, incomplete and, often, irrelevant information. At one extreme, a report was found by GK 1 to have contained the wrong content, possibly due to very limited knowledge of the topic on the part of the writer(s). GK 1, however, felt that the topics should not have posed any problems because to him business students should already

possess some knowledge of the Internet and the online service industry. His comments reflected to some extent, the expectations held by people in the workplace regarding university students' knowledge level.

The contents of the reports were also judged to be severely inadequate because all had limited application to the actual context of the online financial service industry. The information provided mostly consisted of vague generalities and oftentimes theories and definitions. There were loose underdeveloped parts as well as weak, inadequate introductions, conclusions and recommendations. What the gatekeepers would have liked to see was some indication of how a particular idea/ system/ theory might work in practice. They obtained instead information that was of limited use to them/ the service industry. With reference to the 'acceptability' criteria discussed earlier, this criticism ties in with the gatekeepers' concerns for the application of knowledge to a given context. It appears here that without this feature, the reports would fail to achieve its purpose of being an analytical report.

Organization was another major problem. Many of the reports had coherence and unity problems. A common complaint among the gatekeepers was that the reports lacked a good flow of ideas because of the little connection that existed between points. As a consequence, it was very difficult for the gatekeepers to determine and follow the relationship of the ideas/points in the reports.

As for Language and Style, the complaints centred around poor sentence structure and grammar. There were also problems of poor expression which

caused some difficulty for GK 2 in understanding the contents of some of the reports. For someone who liked to read reports in as little time as possible, this was rather frustrating. She attributed that partly to lack of conciseness in which the information was expressed. Again, this point is in tandem with her earlier comment on conciseness in both Content and Language (see criteria for reports).

In close relation to language use was the problem in word choice and formation. Most of the comments on this came from GK 1. GK 2 gave very few comments on word choice and formation although there were many such errors in the reports she evaluated. For GK 1, what was rather disturbing is some of the students' attempt at using difficult words and jargon. It was found that these words were either inappropriately or wrongly used. This alone indicated to GK 1 that the students had limited level of vocabulary. He strongly felt that a report should contain simple language, but if jargon is or needs to be used, a description of the word should be provided.

The comments on Language and Style were, however, limited to only a few reports. It was not quite possible for the gatekeepers to make comments on many of the reports due to excessive plagiarism. Therefore, it is difficult to say at this juncture how much the other reports conformed (or otherwise) to the criteria set forth on 'Language'. The gatekeepers were of the opinion that the students plagiarised because of their limited ability in language but could have taken the efforts to summarise instead of copying a whole chunk. In addition, instead of giving information that provided nothing substantial but generalities, the students would have done better if they had provided the main points. This is an aspect of

'Language' to do with the ability to write concisely and clearly as well as the ability to extract main ideas and synthesize from sources. The student interviews revealed that the students plagiarised partly because of language problems and partly because of a limited knowledge of the content/topic: reiterating every word seemed safer to them than misconstruing the facts and information. Therefore, it may be rather premature at this stage to make any strong conclusions about language use in this study, except that in line with the expectations the two gatekeepers had for the reports, the students might have lacked both the content and language facility to perform up to the standard expected.

#### **5.2.4 Recommendations for Improvement**

The study also sought the gatekeepers', teacher's and the students' viewpoints on measures to be taken in making the reports more acceptable to the intended audience. Results indicate that many of the recommendations provided by the gatekeepers, teacher and students alike were for improving the contents of the reports. Some of the more prominent ones include suggestions for the students/writers to equip themselves with background knowledge regarding the online financial service industry in order to produce a more 'solid' report. There is also a strong need for the reports to be more application-oriented so that readers could see how the issue in question fit into the context of the organisation's line of business. In addition, both gatekeepers and the teachers commented on the need to strengthen the conclusions and recommendations in most of the reports. The emphasis was on writing recommendations that were feasible and workable for the organisation.

The suggestions put forward here clearly indicate the extent to which Content figured prominently in the gatekeepers' judgements of reports. For the students and teachers, their concern for Content was perhaps influenced by the gatekeepers' evaluation of the reports. Nonetheless, information such as the above not only is useful for remedial purposes but provides ESP teachers with a fairly good idea on the conventions that pertain to writing the contents of a report in the workplace, thus it should be taken into account in classroom teaching.

Recommendations for 'Language' from GK 1 and GK2 as well as the teacher were very limited because of plagiarism. However, from the few reports in which language use of the writer(s) was more evident, the recommendations were mainly for improving sentence structures and grammar, and one or two on making the language concise and simple. No recommendation was made on word choice, although this was also a major weakness in many of the reports. Other recommendations had to do with aspects of the composing process, specifically prewriting as well as a more effective use of visuals.

### **5.2.5 Implications for The Report Writing Component**

The findings obtained in this study have several implications for the Report Writing component in the English for Business course at UKM. These have been discussed at length in Chapter 4. What follows is a summary of the main points. Firstly, there needs to be a closer look at course content and approaches to ensure that they consist of areas that would help in the development of skills in report

writing and general writing ability. This would involve measures such as providing intensive practice in developing better report writing skills with regard to Introduction, Conclusion and Recommendation since they are important skills yet problematic for students. Paying particular attention to these three areas would help student writers gain better control over the content of the report. It is perhaps crucial for doing so because the study has shown that Content seems to be the most important in a report. It is only fair that the course devote more time and emphasis on helping students produce better contents for reports.

The findings of this study also imply that the course may need to consider a situational approach to teaching reports that takes into account workplace writing demands and practices. Such an approach would incorporate elements such as audience analysis and collaborative report writing. It would also pay attention to certain considerations in workplace writing such as the importance of making information accessible to busy people, the rigorous nature of workplace writing such as thinking and writing quickly under time pressure as well as the different kinds of situations or communication for reports. All these would help enlighten students on real world expectations with regard to written documents so as to provide them with a sense of purpose in taking the course. In other words, the course should try as much as possible to expose students to learning experiences that will realistically prepare them for future writing demands.

In terms of general writing ability, there should be greater focus in the course on providing students with the operational skills and strategies in basic language use for writing as well as skills closely related to basic composition or academic

writing such as organizing and summarizing . The latter may help students be more confident at using their own words when writing instead of plagiarising. In addition to all these, efforts should also be directed to stages of the composing process. Taking students through the process of producing the report would help encourage and develop information search skills, reasoning as well as analytical skills that the gatekeepers found to be necessary in report writing.

Secondly, the course could consider raising the standards of grading reports so as to provide students with a realistic indication of their ability to perform in a job situation. It has been seen in this study that almost all of the reports that the students wrote were found to be unacceptable, indicating a mismatch between the Report Writing component in the course and real world expectations. Another alternative is to pitch the course at a different level, perhaps in line with students' ability . Thirdly and lastly, there should be more efforts taken to understand the conventions and expectations that pertain to writing reports in the workplace so that the course could help facilitate the production of reports/any other written documents which employers regard as 'acceptable' for organisational uses.



### 5.3 IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

This study suggests the need for ESP teachers to gain some knowledge on the expectations and conventions about writing done on the job as well as the underlying skills and strategies necessary for a successful report. This is important because such information could urge teachers to reconsider approaches in teaching, course design and evaluation practices. One of the ways for approaching the teaching of reports, for example, is to bring in elements of workplace writing into the classrooms so as to provide learners with some exposure to work related writing. In terms of evaluation, teachers could consider evaluating students' writing skills based on writing standards determined by business professionals. Ideas such as forming a university 'writing across the curriculum program' (Lanier et.al, 1997: 77) could be worth considering.

The findings of this study also point to the need for teachers to teach generalizable skills that can be applied to a variety of writing situations. These skills consist of general writing skills such as writing concisely and clearly and skills for good organization which students, whose initial level of the language is poor, are bound to have problems with (see Chapter 4 on suggestions for improving the teaching of report writing in the course). The danger perhaps in a course which teaches writing for a specific discipline is emphasizing the teaching of content knowledge at the expense of language. Teachers should bear in mind that second language students require a 'more principled and explicit prescription for communication' (Thomas, 1995) for them to manage the language/writing demands in genres such as a report.

Lastly, teachers should consider reviewing the course objectives, current format and grading scale to see how they aid students in preparing for report writing at the workplace. These are important measures to minimise any mismatch between the course and actual job situations or expectations for writing. On a more practical level, doing so would provide students with a realistic indication of their abilities in an occupational context.

#### **5.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

The results of this study suggest further research that can be undertaken along the lines of this study. They are as follows:

1. Further research should be undertaken to examine the 'acceptability' of written business reports using a larger sample of gatekeepers either in or across organisations. It may then be more possible to generalize broadly the criteria used to measure writing quality, thus establishing the 'standards for reports' in its true sense of the word. The study has uncovered that perceptions on writing may differ across contexts, job functions and demands, therefore, a larger population of gatekeepers would also compensate for any variations in perceptions/ viewpoints. There is, however, the need to gain access into the organisation(s), for which the researcher should be prepared to undertake.

2. It would also be interesting to investigate and compare the rules by which 'acceptability' of reports is measured in different departments within a business organisation. In this regard, the population of gatekeepers selected should be representative of that particular department.
  
3. This study has also uncovered many other factors to do with writing on the job which are external to the document/report. These include personality, ways of approaching writing tasks, job design, job roles, the organisation's discursive practices, changes in the organisation's external environment and others which, in keeping with the research objectives in the study, were not discussed at length. Further research, thus, needs to be carried out which attend to these 'external-to-the-document factors' shaping 'the ways readers (of reports) perceive, interpret (and in the case of this study evaluate reports) and use organisational documents' (Suchan, 1998:15). It is a kind of a discourse analysis study which would provide a richer account of how reports are evaluated and the factors that determine readers' judgements on the reports.
  
4. Alternatively, research could be done to examine a corpus of company reports to see what conventions exist in reports of a certain kind. The problem in doing this, however, is gaining complete access to company documents which generally are confidential.

5. Further research which explores the effectiveness of the ESP course in question should be carried out. The results of this study point at a few aspects such as course objective(s), course approaches and methodology and student evaluation. An empirical research that tests course effectiveness would be beneficial. This could take the form of an investigation into the effectiveness of a particular approach, for instance, to see whether an explicit instruction in language and style (as suggested in this study) makes a difference in the students' overall quality of writing.
  
6. There should be more collaborative research between the university and the workplace. Research of this nature is a good way for teachers, as non-*bona fide* members of the business community, to better understand the expectations held by employers in the workplace with regard to graduates' language abilities. Learning to write professionally can be very difficult for students so teachers ought to find ways to enlighten students on the contexts of work related writing.

## 5.5 SUMMARY

In conclusion, this study was carried out to gain some useful perspectives on workplace writing demands and, to some extent, this has been achieved. It was a preliminary attempt at accessing information on the rules by which written documents such as a report is judged for the purpose of improving the way the teaching and learning of reports is done in the English for Business course at UKM. It is satisfying to note, that even as a preliminary study, it has yielded valuable information with regard to these. A quote taken from Le Vasan (1994) illustrates its usefulness for the ESP teacher:

‘ Like a football coach, the ESP teacher needs to know not only the strengths and weaknesses of the away team but also to be extremely knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the game so as to equip the home team adequately for the sport. In the ESP context, effective teaching of skills means effective operations of mechanisms within the industry. The ESP teacher must first understand the society and mechanisms that operate in the society, before s/he begins to equip new members with effective skills.’ (1994: 30)